stories about

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Stories About Things

by Aelius Blythe

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First Smashwords Edition

kopimi

Introduction

(Don't worry, it's short.)

These are stories about things.
Some from this world. Some from other worlds.
Small things. Disconnected things. Meaningless things.
Just things.

~A.

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Part I. Thought and Memories: things of this world...

ONE
Teacups

Dirt.

That was a more pleasant smell.

Dirt didn't smell dirty. It smelled like life and it smelled like growth and it smelled like comfort.

It was more pleasant than this.

This was old and it smelled like old.

Like oil mixed with dust mixed with rags mixed with closed doors and no airflow and dark. Like the smell of an old barn. Like the smell of someone's grandmother's house forgotten on a lot with too many trees grown up around it.

The smell of neglect.

The china was cold.

It shouldn't have been. It should have been warm, it should have been hot–too hot to hold and filled with tea too hot to drink.

He wiped a finger around the flowers. The paint was fine, thin, almost flat, but he'd always been able to feel the designs on the cup, just a little bit.

He couldn't feel them now.

The flowers were covered in dust, and the dust was all he felt.

She wasn't like this.

He bent down to the shelf. He shouldn't, he knew he shouldn't. His back seemed to know it, it stiffened as his head tried to bend down to the little china cup. He shouldn't. Not here. Not in the place of closed doors and no airflow and dark. Not here. But his head bent down anyway and his nose brushed the dust at the bottom of the teacup and he sniffed.

The dust went in his nose.

The dust and the oily smell of the dark and airless antique shop.

He turned away.

His eyes shut and he straightened up and turned away from the shelf. He turned away even though his eyes were shut, because he didn't want to face the cup.

It should smell like the ground.

It always had.

The tea in the cup had always smelled like the earth after a warm rain. He never tasted it, but he would smell it. As a child, he hated the smell of his grandmother's tea.

Now, the memories were sweet.

It shouldn't be here.

The dust and the smell of the dust and the dark and the forgotten air of the antique shop was no place for this cup. But there was no place for it now.

It shouldn't be here.

He opened his eyes and looked back at the cup. It looked sad. It looked like it missed the heat of the water and the steam and the smell of earth just like he did.

A sticker on the handle said $25. He'd only gotten $5 for it.

But he did not have $25.

One hand brushed out and swept the cup to the ground.

Out of it's misery.

"Oops," he said, because he felt like he should.

"Hey!"

An old man hobbled out of the back room, but he was too slow. The teacup lay shattered on the ground a bell jangled and then the door banged shut.

TWO

Time

Dr. Ellis had nearly given up on time travel. He had built a solid theory, as well as a solid machine (several in fact,) but it was all useless. The machine sat in his laboratory, and the theory sat in his head because he had not yet devised a method to power them with. He had tried nuclear power, solar power, hydrogen fuel and even a wood-burning stove. None of it worked.

The answer came to him one day when he was very hungry. He was considering a slice of cherry pie in a store window, the sweet goo pouring out of the flaky crust, yellowed with butter under a large swirl of cream. For what seemed like an hour he stared, tried to remember how much cash he had in his pocket and stared some more. When the bakery manager came out, Dr. Ellis was startled out of his trance. Wiping a little drool from the corner of his mouth he apologized, blushed, and hurried away, but not before catching sight of the clock.

"That's it!" he shouted, then blushed again as passers-by stared. *We've had the power source with us all this time,* he thought, silently this time.

And so they–that is to say, people–had. For as he walked away from the store and the cherry pie, he noticed that barely two minutes had passed, yet surely it was an hour! He knew then: the *mind* powers time.

And we are the machine! he thought in triumph.

Upon arriving home, he scrapped all his old work and began to work on a new theory using the human mind as both the vessel and power source. He experienced great success in this venture. Soon, he could, in theory, make hours race ahead, allowing, for example, one to experience the end and beginning of a dull dinner party without any of the in-between parts that made it dull. Or, he could slow seconds down to a near stand still allowing more time for enjoyable things, like love-making, cherry pie, and good books.

There were two problems with his research. First, though he could slow down time or speed it up into the future, he had not yet figured out how to go backwards. He hypothesized, however, that this was possible, and kept working at it. Perhaps a combination of factors could exert enough force on the mind to make it turn backwards.

He tried many formulas to achieve this. For example: a lecture on the tree-ant's sleeping patters plus full logarithm tales plus a twelve foot pile of manila folders to be filed. That one was pretty close; it managed to bring time to a near standstill. But still it would not go backwards.

The second problem was the interference of the subconscious. If left alone, it would drag the host through the dull moments, expanding seconds into hours, and collapse hours into seconds during the fantastic moments.

Dr. Ellis theorized that this was an evolutionary mechanism, and quite a powerful one. Nature wanted the organism to realize just how boring the

boring moments were, so it would avoid those in the future. The organism also needed to get through the fantastic moments quickly so that they could seek out more and more of these. While no doubt a biological advantage, this was exactly the tendency he wished to counter.

The subconscious problem was a particular beast. The doctor worked obsessively on it. He thought it was rather as if the subconscious controlled walking. One could try all morning to arrive at work, only to end up at the theater or the bakery.

To solve the problem, he tried many methods of distracting the subconscious. (Would it falter for a raspberry torte? Or a well-proportioned blonde?) If it were distracted long enough, then the conscious mind could sneak off through time. He also tried tricking the subconscious mind into inverting its natural patterns (would a caramel cheesecake make work meetings fly by? Would a persistent itch make a holiday last forever?) The subconscious, however, was a stubborn and well-disciplined creature. It had made its patterns and stuck with them like cement.

Still, he worked and he worked. One night, as he was fiddling with a distraction contraption he'd built, he cut his finger on a piece of aluminum foil. He tried to ignore it, but the blood dripped all over the contraption and ran onto his notes. He went to the bathroom to find a bandage.

He opened the door, with the non-bloody hand, and walked into the bathroom. There was somebody there! He jumped in alarm, shoulders twitching, hands shaking. Seeing the stranger's reflection, he whirled to accost the intruder. But his knee gave way, spilling him to the floor. When he looked up, the stranger had gone. Shaking, knee throbbing, he stood, gripped the sink. There! He was back! Slowly this time, but still trembling he turned his head. But as he did, the stranger turned away. They turned back and stared at each other, the mirror in between.

Dr. Ellis looked at his own drooping skin and pale eyebrows.

"No!" he yelled. "I don't know how to go back yet!"

He stumbled back to his desk. His notes were all in disarray. He clawed through them desperately.

"There must be a key in here somewhere!"

Crimson drips fell from his finger.

Through stacks of diagrams and formulas his withered hands searched.

"I know I can fix it...I know I can fix it..."

The faster he searched, the longer his grizzled hair grew. Joints groaned and stiffened. His concave chest struggled to expand enough for air.

"There must...be a way...to go...back."

His head spun, and the panic grew wilder. His hair grew faster, and his joints grew slower. His breaths grew weaker.

Thunk.

The cement floor ground against his bent back. Failing fingers clutched a stack of papers. Pupils, quickly clouding with cataracts, strained to see.

"How...how..."
Then time stopped. At least, it did for him.

THREE

The Name

Goddamnit.

Everyone else was tried not to let their sobs drown out the eulogy.

Not me.

It wasn't that I wasn't sobbing (but I wasn't.) It wasn't that I wasn't listening to the eulogy (but I wasn't.) It wasn't that I wasn't totally remembering what a great guy the dearly departed was (Of he was. Who needed reminding?)

Goddamnit!

It wasn't any of those things.

It was the name.

What was it?

He *was* a great guy. Totally. Fun, energetic, handsome; the kind everybody liked. That was the reason they all attended his funeral. That's why I was there, anyway. I remembered the laughing, good-natured, slightly drunk face very well.

But not the name that went with it.

Mother always used to scoff at the people with funny names. But I remembered every single Dallas or Anferny I'd ever met. My mental landscape was full of Toms and Justins, and Jessicas and Katies. They were as common as paving stones and slipped by without notice.

Could have been Justin. Could have been Tom.

Tom... Tom?

The name started to insert itself into the memories. *Tom.* That could have been it.

No stop that.

It would have been awkward if it slipped out of my mouth. Or it *would* be awkward if it turned out that it wasn't actually his name. For all I knew, it could have been. But if not, would "Oops, wrong funeral," get me out of that one?

There must have been some mention of his name in the "Dearly Departed" clause. Too bad I was trying so hard to remember it to pay attention then.

Then,

Oh.

JACK, it said on the temporary grave marker.

Oh. Jack. Right.

Got back to the apartment.

"How was whasisnames funeral?" said the roommate. "What *was* his

name anyway?"

"I don't know, but the ceremony was great."

FOUR
Maple Syrup

Syrup dripped slowly, not like blood. Syrup was sweet, too, but Chi didn't know what blood tasted like. Rusty, maybe, from the iron, iron like in magnets. He used to think that was why people stuck to the earth: they had metal in them, and so did the planet. He didn't think that anymore. If it were true, then why did dead people stick just as hard as living people, even when all the blood was drained out? Why didn't they go floating up away? He used to think that was why they nailed coffins shut.

Sip. Click.

The flask snapped back in its seat on his hip where a magnet stuck it in place. Mother thought it was rum, and he let her think that. Rum didn't work, though. Rum erased what maple syrup remembered. Other people drank, remembered things that didn't happen and forgot things that did. Chi wanted to remember what happened and forget what didn't.

Sip. Click.

The store itself was not the temptation. Not that Chi could ignore the rows upon rows of maple sugar cookies, gallons of syrup, lollipops in the shape of maple leafs, and tawny fudge squares. He couldn't. He was a good boy, though, and he wasn't tempted by the things that he shouldn't have.

The temptation wasn't the cookies and syrup and lollipops and fudge; it was the key. The key hung on the wall by the door after dark when his parents had gone to bed. He looked at it every evening at six, when his mother and father locked up the store and brought in the key. Sometimes, he would get up in the night, come downstairs quietly, and stare at the little piece of silver hanging on the peg by the door.

Sip. Click.

It was funny that the taste hadn't gone away all these years. Chi had thought that eventually he would get used to the sticky sweetness of the syrup and wouldn't be able to taste it. But he still did. Maybe it was a symbiotic relationship--the syrup and the memories--one kept the other alive. The memories hadn't faded, and the taste was part of the memories. The taste kept alive the memories, which kept alive the taste... Whatever the reason, the maple sweetness was just as clear as the day he'd first drunk it, and it recalled that time perfectly.

Sip. Click.

"No, we're not supposed to!" Geo had said the first time they snuck into the shop after dark.

Chi agreed. They *were* good boys, both of them. But rows of sweets, stacked neatly in a dark storeroom will sing to any young child, and Chi was listening. Now that he stood, key in hand, with his parents sleeping in the house, he heard their song loud and clear. Geo was not really trying to resist anyway; he was just making a token protest to fall back on later when they were caught. All Chi needed to do was make the token argument to cement the deal. It was the standard contract of light mischief. So he said,

"Who'll know?"

He took one of the little jugs of syrup and poured it into their two bottles (white ones that you couldn't see inside of.) The shelves only took a little rearranging to conceal the empty space. And the empty jar of evidence they buried by a tree. They sipped the syrup slowly so it would last. It wasn't difficult, though, like eating a chocolate bar slowly is difficult. No one can drink maple syrup except drop by drop, one sip at a time.

Sip. Click.

It went in a metal flask now instead of a white water bottle. He was almost grown now, and grown men who didn't play sports and worry about nutrition and hydration and those sorts of things didn't carry around water bottles everywhere. No one carried around hip flasks either, but Chi did it anyway. He needed something to carry the memories in, and the flask had come with a nice holder with a magnet.

"Don't dwell," they told him, all of them, parroting each other. "Look ahead of you, not behind you."

But he wanted to look behind. There were rocks back there, and if you weren't careful you could trip. You had to look. His mother put it a different way.

"Don't run backwards," she said. "Don't run backwards."

And don't push, either, he would add, but silently in his head so she wouldn't hear it.

Sip. Click.

He sipped the syrup carefully, one drop at a time. And he remembered carefully, one moment at a time. There was only one thing he couldn't remember.

Sip. Click.

Sip. Click.

Sip, sip, sip.

Click.

No matter how hard he tried, no matter how carefully he went over the memories, there was one he could not recover. For ten years, maple syrup held all the memories except that one.

Why was he angry? He couldn't remember.

Sip. Click.

Push. Thud. What were they fighting about? It must have been something important. It *must* have been. But if it was so important, then why couldn't he remember?

Sip. Click.

Slip.

Crack.

"Geo? Geo?"

That was the moment when he forgot. He had been angry, he knew he had, but at the sharp crack of bone on rock and the thud of Geo's body hitting the ground, he forgot.

The blood ran fast, and so did Chi. He ran and he ran, back to the house, though his stomach and chest and his legs all cramped up, and he couldn't breathe fast enough to get oxygen to the muscles.

He ran for his father and mother, then his mother ran for the doctor down the street, and someone ran for the policeman.

"Geo's hurt," he'd said, and everyone listened because they were good boys and never got into trouble.

They all ran very fast back to the field behind the house. But the blood ran faster. It was all out of Geo by the time Chi got back with help.

Sip. Click.

Drinking water would give him more energy. If he had more energy then he could run faster. But Chi didn't run anymore. There was no reason to. Blood was like water, and it ran fast. If you had a race with blood, it would always win, no matter how fast you ran. Maple syrup ran slow, and you didn't have to race against it. He was done racing.

His mother thought he was too slow.

"You have to get out of the room," she'd say. "Get a job, meet some friends."

She wanted him to go forward instead of backwards. Chi didn't think he was *going* backwards, though. He was *looking* backwards, and that was an entirely different thing. *Looking* backwards was important, even when you were standing still. He had to see what was there. There was something back there, and even if everybody else didn't see it, he had to.

Sip. Click.

"What happened?" they had asked.

All of them, the doctor, the police, his mother, asked the same question.

His hand still held a baseball. He'd forgotten about that too. When he looked down at it, it answered for him.

"Accidental?" they'd said, already nodding sadly, because these were good boys and when trouble happened, it was an accident.

"Yes," Chi said. "He was running backwards and tripped on the rock, smacked his head on the pile. He was running backwards to catch a ball."

"Yes," his mother said. "He comes out with his friend to play baseball all the time," she explained, and they nodded. You could see the worn grass between the bases - three trees and a shrub for home.

They were good boys and it was an accident. The grass was wet, and he wasn't looking behind as he ran back. Slipped and hit the rock too hard. Too bad, they said, shaking their heads.

"That's why you don't do that," his mother said, crying. "That's why you look where you are going."

"It was baseball. He was running to catch a ball. He was looking at the ball. You do that in baseball."

Sip. Click.

Ten years of drinking maple syrup had rotted his teeth prematurely. Chi didn't care. Teeth could be fixed, the past couldn't be. He wondered if memories could be. He wanted to fix his memories.

They weren't broken that bad, he thought.

Everyone else's were worse because they only looked ahead. The taste of the syrup had recalled the day for him, recalled it crystal clear, for ten years, except for the one thing. Sip after sip of maple syrup, flask after flask, jug after jug, and he could not remember why he was angry. He could not remember why he pushed Geo onto the rocks. That had been wiped from his mind the moment the other boy fell, and no amount of looking had brought it back. He kept trying anyway.

Sip. Click.

FIVE
The Swing

When the swing fell again, the tree died.

That wasn't how it was the first time. Then, it had been just a matter of getting a new rope and stringing it back up. They couldn't do that anymore because there was nothing to string it up on.

The first time, Bridget has seen the rope make a graceful arc from bough to ground. It had sounded like a candy bar snapping in half (not one of the gooey ones, though–a crisp bar. Like Crunch or Hersheys, not Twix.) A soft, crisp pop, then the arc. Broken from hours of carrying her up into the sky, it was a beautiful, not a sad injury.

She had shared the wound then, too. The seat disappeared from beneath her, somehow falling much faster than her own body and the rope's. Of course, she should have been holding on like her father always said to, but she liked to drape her arms lightly around the ropes. That way, it was more like flying.

That time, she really had been flying. Her body was weightless, not like a bird struggling to keep itself aloft, but really weightless like the air itself.

For a second.

She saw the broken rope falling beside her, and wondered how it felt to finally be free of the tree. They landed beside each other in the leaves which crunched beneath them. It sounded like applause.

The second time the swing fell, there was no applause, and no flying.

The saws screamed so loudly that Bridget couldn't even hear the snap of the branches. She imagined it must have sounded like a much bigger bar of candy - maybe a solid block of chocolate filled with nuts.

The branch with the swing went first because it was lowest. The swing fell silently, or at least whatever sound it made was drowned by the hysterical saw. It's branch made a soft *whump* against the ground, which was again brown with leaves.

Bridget couldn't help cringing, just a little, remembering the bruising fall. The swing and the branch laying beside each other reminded her of her and the rope laying beside each other, looking at each other. But she had been happy then, despite the bruises, and she couldn't imagine the rope feeling sad either. Both the swing and the branch looked sad now. They hadn't flown, just fallen. The grace was gone.

Maybe that was why the leaves didn't applaud.

She looked for one second, then another limb fell on top of the first, then

another and another. Then the trunk joined the pile and the screaming finally stopped. For a while she just stared at the pile, unsure of whether she were looking at it from the outside or whether she were still trapped down there on the ground with the swing.

SIX

That Night, There Was No Dinner

The filet mignon was tempting, but the stewed tomatoes were heavenly. Of course, Cora's attention was not caught by dish itself, but on the one who could transform the hated food into such a delicious piece of art. The medley of spices masterfully blended made the single tomato into an entire meal in itself. After that first bite, she paid little attention to the other dishes. The other chefs were good, but they were only human.

Caleb was a magician.

She read his nametag when she snuck back to the makeshift kitchens to investigate the origins of the miraculous tomato dish. He was there cooking, surrounded by a cloud of spices. Those spices would always linger in his hair and his clothing. Her mother argued, scornfully, that Cora had only fallen in love with the scent and the spices but not the man.

"He isn't *handsome*," the older woman would protest. "And he can't afford to make himself so."

Cora disagreed.

Her mother's party had brought the two together. Her insistence on gourmet and fresh-cooked refreshments for her aristocratic guests was responsible for Caleb's presence in that neighborhood, one in which he would never have been seen out of uniform. Her mother was responsible for their meeting. But she had skipped the tomatoes that evening, and hadn't cared who made them. It was only when the cooking dared to woo her daughter that she even noticed him.

Cora's pleading never bought her mother's approval; but Caleb's talents in the kitchen could tempt it. When she eventually deigned to try her son-in-law's cooking, she at least had to admit that her daughter's heart–or perhaps her stomach–had never stood a chance against that charm. Even the stubborn heiress could *attempt to* forgive the pale, rotund man his looks and poverty for one of his homemade meals.

Still, even after three years of marriage, the audacious woman would call her daughter from time to time about some attractive (and always well-off) young gentleman she'd met at one of her clubs. Just last night she'd suggested one.

"He can afford an entire kitchen of cooks!" she'd argued.

"But I love Caleb," said Cora.

"Oh Cora..." she sighed. "Forget him. Please?"

Cora hung up.

That night, like every night, she fell asleep thinking about him and woke to the same thoughts in the morning. In the hazy moments before fully waking she felt the weight of his limbs wrapped around her like a comforter. Her chin

rested on a hand as big as two of her own. And against her back, his soft chest leaned like a pillow. She felt absolutely secure. In those moments, she shifted in and out of the pre-dawn doze. Her thoughts lifted her up lightly, like clouds, and she rested on them in lazy contentment. Her mind entertained only one subject.

His teeth shown like alabaster - all of them - when he smiled, and the rose in his cheeks never paled. His arms were heavy, but gentle; her own barely reached around his waist. She felt tiny in his arms, but safe. And always, the scent of spices lingered in his hair and clothes and over his skin.

The house, too, was always full of their perfume: steak sautéing in onions and peppers, spiced tomatoes, stuffed olives, and herbal breads. She drank in the aromas in every breath, and at night they wrapped her up like a comfort blanket.

"I must remember to get cumin for the chili tonight" she reminded herself before the shifting half dreams swept her away again.

But as she drifted off, a lead dart punctured the clouds she lay upon.

The smile she remembered had faded and the cheeks dulled.

That day there had been no dinner.

Beans sat soaking on the stove but the soup was never made.

The hospital had a dining room but it was not the same.

She could not have eaten anyway with the elephantine weight crushing her chest. Even breathing was hard. Each breath seemed insufficient to sustain her until the next. The blanched waiting room was like a lifer's cell; she could not imagine the world outside it. Hours and hours pressed in on it until it seemed no bigger than a closet. Beneath the petrifiction that gripped her body, a tremor shook her heart.

Only when the news came did the scalding tears fall from her frozen lids.

They were tears of relief: Caleb had survived.

She vaguely remembered that there was a person in the other car and that they didn't make it, but that seemed inconsequential. Seeing her husband's face, the smile only a little less broad, sent the drips from her eyes cascading onto his gown and blanket. The color returning to his face lit up the room for her like a torch.

When he walked again they walked together, always. When he cooked she stood over his shoulder watching and learning his secrets. When she shopped, they walked hand in hand down the aisles picking out the perfect ingredients. And at night she could smell the spices in her own hair.

Again her thoughts were like clouds, As wakefulness crept upon her she kept her eyes closed still wrapped in the delicious memories. Not for long though, for they could not tempt her from the real thing.

But today he was not beside her when she opened her eyes. As her mind woke fully to the daylight, the weight of his arms and the warmth of his body disappeared. But as she looked at his neatly made up side of the bed, she smiled at his attention to detail.

Oh how much tidier he is than other men, she thought

However, when she sat up, he was not there, and no sound from the bathroom or downstairs betrayed his presence. The silence buzzed obtrusively and the room felt strangely empty. The dresser top was cleared off, and only her dresses hung in the closet. Then her eyes fell on a box, half packed by the door. Caleb's comb lay inside, and a tie pocked over one side.

"Where are you going?: she called to the house.

The empty room yawned around her like a mouth. Legs with just a hint of tremors sought the floor. Down the empty hallways she walked and the great mouth opened further to encompass the whole house. She peered around each doorway cautiously as if it were a tooth threatening to chomp down. Staring down the stairs, she saw a slide that would whisk her away to its dark end. She went down anyway and stood in the dim foyer. Stretching her eyes, she tried to see the familiar hulking shape dozing on the couch or coming around the kitchen door. A fluttering hand touched the light switch, but as the room brightened the only shapes that resolved were the tall bookshelves, the fireplace and the furniture. On the fireplace mantle there was a curious vase without flowers or clippings. She walked to it and stared at her face in the polished brass. It had a lid which she lifted with one hand.

Grey ashes the color of his sparkling eyes stared up at her. The lid crashed to the hearth chipping the stone. Her shoulders drew together so tightly they ached. Fingered pressed on her brow as new memories tumbled over her, supplanting fantasy.

Again, she remembered.

Again, the morning woke her to the memory she'd fallen asleep to.

Only the hearth, chipped in hundreds of places, where the urn's lid had crashed down again and again, knew many times the memory had been forced back on her.

Another crash made her twitch and before she could stop herself she called his name.

"Caleb?"

Then she felt herself blush and looked away in disappointment as her mother walked in. Cora stared at the urn before two manicured hands swept it away.

"Why do you stare at that like he's still here? You should be moving on, forgetting the past. That's how you deal with it dear; it's what they all say."

Cora had not found her mother's pop psychology advice helpful in the least and ignored it now. She was silent as her mother moved about the room

brushing off tabletops and straightening rugs She'd hidden the urn behind the bookshelves.

"Honey, it's been three years. Honestly, sometimes it's like you don't even know he's gone."

Cora didn't listen, she was still trying to crawl away from the real memories. But they chased her down. Her mind sat in the hospital waiting room--it really was a cell now. Still waiting, waiting, waiting. But they wouldn't come home together. She didn't look at her mother.

"Now, this one's a real gentleman so try not to scare him away before the second date, okay?"

Date? Cora flinched. *Not again. Not Again!*

Her mind crawled faster, away from the memories of her mothers matchmaking attempts. She didn't know whether her mother did this to remind her that Caleb was dead, or to remind her of all the men she could have agreed to marry instead .

"And please tell me you've cleared out his things. The last thing he needs to see is another man's clothes in your room. Come on now he'll be here soon."

"He?"

"Your date, hon. His name is Chris."

That wasn't the "he" she was thinking about.

"Go get dressed, honey! He'll be here soon, I told him to come for brunch."

She was tired, and didn't have the strength to fight this. Without a word or thought, she went and dressed.

When the doorbell rang she opened it and she looked into a pair of brown eyes. But all she could see was grey ashes.

Standing in the living room, not listening to her mother's chatter she looked at the new pair of eyes. They seemed disembodied–they had no body that Cora could see, anyway. She could not have said whether he were tall or short or handsome or repulsive. It didn't matter.

The brown eyes swept over the shelves full of cookbooks.

"Do you cook?" he asked hopefully.

"No." she said. "I don't"

SEVEN

First Impressions

Those shoes!

To kiss those shoes... To bend over them, brush a cheek against the jade toes... Velour? Velvet? Oh to caress that fabric and find out! Just the shoes... Just the shoes.

The skirts don't match.

Yellow petals brush the green toes. Each layer is translucent in the sun, but hung together, the piece is opaque. Like a daffodil.

A slender yellow stalk sways above the skirt. Dress... a dress, not a skirt.

"Don't take a pretty book home just cuz it's pretty," Mom always said, "and a girl neither."

Somewhere above the shoes, above the dress, there are eyes.

The flower smiles.

Not at him.

The flower has brown eyes, a bright brown, almost-red. They smile. They don't shine *in* the sun. They shine *at* the sun. A street sign, a bus shelter, a sidewalk, cement cubicles a hundred feet high--a daffodil grows at their feet. Oh to look into those eyes and see them looking back!

But no, he couldn't bear it.

Don't look. Don't look... But it's like hoping the sun doesn't shine. *Look. Please look.*

They do.

Our children will have those eyes.

The sun is dumb beside them... shining down stupid on the grey world. No understanding, no discretion, bright only in color. But the eyes in the flower are bright. Intelligent. Looking on the world, smart and kind. The street sign, the bus shelter, the sidewalk, the cement cubicles--the flower makes sense of it all.

The eyes say so.

So much in two eyes in a flower. So much... Our children... our children will have them. Our children could be doctors with those eyes. Lawyers, or inventors or scholars. Those eyes could make a president.

"Don't take a pretty book home just cuz it's pretty," Mom said.

"Why do you comb your hair so careful for the interview?" he asked.

"First impressions count."

First impressions count.

How? How... To hear the flower speak! But how? How...

The daffodil sways in the breeze, sways away... away.

Stop!

No, that's not it. Maybe...

Hello. Are you lost? I can help you--

But she might say no.

What beautiful shoes--What's you're name?...Does that come with a number?

No.

Hi, I'm lost, do you know where I can find a map?

How... how to speak to a flower? to hear it speak back?

The shoes disappear around the corner.

"Wait!"

Where ... ?

"Wait! What's you're name? I like your–your shoes are–"

Already gone, already gone.

Part II. Fairies and Things: things of other worlds...

ONE
Sun Set

"Never, never look into the sun. Don't ever. There are creatures in there, a fairy relative of the salamander, and the sun is their circle. They don't much like being looked at, and if they catch you staring, they'll snatch you up and carry you off through their fiery ring, which is just as dangerous as any fairy circle on the ground."

Sal's grandmother always warned him like this when she caught him looking. His mother said this was silly, and he was old enough not to be scared by fairy stories. If he looked into the sun, she told him, he would go blind, and that was that.

He never understood how someone could say that– "Don't look at it." People looked. If they could, they did. Sometimes, Sal thought, if he wasn't paying attention he could turn off his hearing so when the lawnmower was going while he was reading he wouldn't even notice. He could turn off his nose too by breathing through his mouth. Touch was a sense that everyone ignored unless it was too bad or too good. Taste was the same. But he could only turn off his sight by closing his eyes, and he couldn't go around like that. He had to look. He didn't know how not to. If he could see something, he would.

He tried telling his mother and grandmother this.

"You keep your eyes on this world," his grandmother would say. "No, you don't go looking into others, or looking *for* them either."

"You'll go blind," his mother would repeat. "Why can't you just look at something else?"

Sal looked at the sun anyway, but only when it was dark orange and low in the sky. He would try to look when it was high up and yellow, but it hurt his eyes. When the sun was setting, he liked to make pictures out of the patterns it cast on the clouds. When there were big, puffy clouds, they looked like orange sheep prancing about a fiery pasture. When there were thin stripes of clouds, they looked like rivers of flame running into the sun – or maybe they were running out. Sometimes he saw eagles, or herds of horses, or

people, or creatures he had no name for.

Today, the clouds were patchy, some voluminous, some thin and wispy, all criss-crossing all over each other. Squinting into the aerial landscape, Sal began to make out shapes in the clouds about the setting sun. He saw hills and fields and rivers and even a forest.

There were animals today, too, but they were in the smaller fields and he couldn't tell what they were. Sheep maybe, but you had to be careful with clouds; when they were all white and puffy, they always looked like sheep. In fact, as he looked closer, straining his eyes to the field closest to the sun, he thought the herd was more cow shaped than anything. Their heads were square and he thought he could see longer tails on some of them.

How intricate the patterns were tonight! So many different types of clouds were clustered together. They almost made an entire town. On the hills and fields he almost thought he saw houses and people and dogs and cats and some water, a lake or seashore perhaps. He could even see the crests of the waves.

There must be a real storm coming, Sal thought, one with all kinds of rain and wind, and maybe even some snow.

He stared and stared at the orange and white paintings in the sky, and then it occurred to him that he recognized some of the features. That one hill (a giant cumulus mass) looked like the hill beside his house. If the animals were cows indeed, they could be his neighbor's who always grazed in the little pasture by Sal's house. And there! His house was beside them. Then a smaller cloud drifted out of the house-shaped one. It was a person-shaped cloud. Why, that could almost be his mother! She stood in the yard looking about and calling–he could see the cloud open its mouth and cup its hands around it. He waved to her, and called out, but she went on looking and looking.

He tried to run towards his house, for he was sure by now that his mother was calling for him, and it was time to come in for dinner. As he ran, the sun sank lower and lower. Within a few minutes it had slipped over the edge of the world, and the hill, the house, and his mother disappeared in the shadows.

He looked about him. The sun had sucked most of the light down with it, and it was already deep twilight. He could see enough, though, to wonder at the landscape. There was a forest, close and black, and an obsidian lake that looked like stone. He turned in a circle and saw that hills surrounded him, even where a moment ago the sun had been. His house was not sitting atop any of them. As he looked at the trees and the water, he realized that they were not the trees and water that he knew.

"Mother!" he called.

There was no answer.

"Mother! he called again.

And there was a whisper, a high whispering laugh, from the shadows. It was not his mother.

Then the twilight vanished, and, in the dark, there were voices and movements in all directions. Dinner was indeed ready, and he was just in time.

TWO

Shark

Nobody liked Josiah.

Under the sun, he was a bleached bone laying on the sand. Like a skeleton buried on unhallowed ground apart from decent folk, he kept away from the living flesh. When the sun went down, he was a shadow on the edge of our bonfires, a silence outside our ring of laughter and flirtation and drinks, lots of drinks.

He was always on the beach. Every weekend, every night, every day. Nobody invited him. They didn't need to; he wasn't really in on the parties. He just shared the space. I guess he just liked the water.

A skinny kid even in the baggy clothes he wore to school, in swimming trunks he was skeletal. In the light of the fires at night, he looked like a snowy ghoul.

"Shark," the girls called him, and giggled.

They laughed to cover up their unease, because he was someone who made people uneasy.

He was a shark, no doubt about it. Not that he was vicious, at least, not in any way we could tell. Really, he just looked like one. There was a pointed look about his face, cheek bones all sticking out at unlikely angles, and a razor of an upper lip. He had a finlike crown, smooth and narrow which, situated atop a stretched frame, always stuck up above a sea of heads.

He moved like a shark, too, in a stalking kind of walk with a pronounced grace about it. He had the kind of grace that you almost wanted to watch, if only it didn't make you so nervous.

"Shark," they would say, and laugh. They laughed together, because laughter in number is safer than laughter alone.

As creepy as he looked prowling the sand, indoors he was a goldfish.

He was the type of twerp I'd give wedgies to, and push into the lockers in the hallways between class. He was the type who had his name scrawled next to funny remarks on the walls of the toilet at school. He was such an easy target, taunting him wasn't even much fun. It was just an imperative of the social food-chain.

I intended to keep my place on it.

This year, as soon as the sun rose on the first day of summer, I was on the sand and in the water. College was coming, and scouts would be there either to usher it in or to bar the way. I wanted to start training early.

But as early as I started, Josiah was ahead of me. That first day he was there, standing in the waves, two minutes after the sun had cleared the horizon. I didn't wave or call to him; guys like me usually didn't even look at guys like him, even when we taunted them they were invisible.

But he looked at me as I ran over the sand. It was hard not to look back

because he was the only one on that long beach.

He looked at me with these blank eyes, and he yawned.

The yawn stretched.

Then he smiled. I'd never seen him do that before.

The smile stretched.

He just stood, waist deep in the surf smiling and yawning, teeth glinting in the morning sun, hands hanging at his sides. I squinted at him.

Did that kid always have extra teeth?

I looked at his arms and realized they weren't so much hanging by his sides as glued to them.

I looked back up to his face. There wasn't much of one left. His head had grown forward over the mouth, the pointed crest of his skull elongating. The small black eyes sitting in ivory skin just looked at me. The mouth with rows upon rows of teeth continued to smile.

The shark dove. A fin wove back and forth between the waves a few times, before it disappeared.

People who live by the ocean don't worry about shark attacks. Most swimmers and surfers couldn't stay out of the water even if they did worry. "What are the chances?" they always say. Every summer, a few arms are lost and maybe a life or two, but with all the tourists crowding the waters, really, what are the chances?

But the tourists and the swimmers and the surfers and the people that live by the ocean don't *know* the sharks. And the sharks don't *know them.*

I don't go down by the water anymore. I can't imagine I have a friend there.

THREE

The Dinner Bells

The chimes laugh.

The window shade, coarse and old, chafes Mort's fingers. *Tug. Release. Tug. Release.* But it only moves down, brushing the chimes as it goes. The rude, tinkling chuckle continues.

Again, he reaches up to the rolling mechanism at the top of the window and fiddles with it. It crumbles a little, but doesn't move. Like the nail holding the chimes in place, like the hinges on the front door, like the keyholes, like the screws on the filthy toilet, like the whole damn house, it is rusted in place.

Mort yanks on the shade. It rises an inch or two, then stops.

Was it always stuck?

Grandmother Morris made that window a decorative nook long ago. Mort had only ever seen the chimes hanging with some dried flowers over the closed shade.

Dead flowers crunch under foot. The shade sands his finger. The chimes laugh.

He never asked.

He never asked about the window with the chimes. He never asked about the flowers or the shade that was never opened, or about anything in the run-down mansion or the wild lands about it at all.

He didn't ask because he didn't care.

As a child left unsupervised for long summers in a too-old and very likely haunted mansion, Mort would have much rather been at home watching a movie about a too-old and very likely haunted mansion. He explored the house, not out of curiosity, but out of boredom and a desire to avoid the too-old and very likely crazy old woman who made decorative nooks out of unused windows.

He never found anything interesting.

The flowers slip underfoot. A drop of blood stains the sharp edge of the shade. The chimes giggle.

Crazy woman!

When he couldn't avoid his grandmother as a child, he did his best to ignore the funny way she talked and the crazy stories she told, none of which he remembers now.

His mother said that Grandmother Morris was old and could do or say whatever she wanted. She said that he was put off by his grandmother because she was very old and children are often put off by the very old. But, she had told him, they really should respect their elders anyway.

Mort showed respect with silence.

If he could help it, he didn't talk to her at all. And because she was funny like that, she didn't seem to mind. She didn't talk much to him either, except when neither one could avoid the other.

The first thing he did when he moved in after she died was take down all flowers and the silly trinkets. He would have removed the chimes too, but like the shade they were stuck. The nail and the chain on which they hung had rusted, and held fast when he tugged.

I'm going to cut them off with a chainsaw!

But that must come later. For now, he is determined to make the shade, and the entire house, functional. It is a window none will see, in the washroom that hasn't been used since there were servants living in an attic that hasn't been used since the rest of the house forgot it.

But he will not have it broken. He will not live in a rusty old antique. He was not a child who thought old things were curious. He is not an adult who thinks they are quaint. He liked–then and now–things that work, and serve their purpose. That way, the world makes sense. That way, the world is functional.

But Mort doesn't like to make things work. He just likes them to be working when he needs them.

The shade defies him.

Two buttons on his shirt hang loose. One pops off as he reaches up to beat on the roll at the top of the window. It rolls behind the toilet and pings against the porcelain. One fist opens to tug at the tie that feels like a choker, but it already hangs limp around his collarbone. Frustrated sweat drips from the once-pressed silk armpits .

Fuck it. Couldn't see shit anyway, it's so dark.

One sweaty hand tears the tie off completely and drops it to the dead-flower-strewn floor.

Nothing worth seeing through that window anyway.

Somebody disagrees.

The creeping shadows out on the lawn think there is something well worth seeing through the attic window. The shadows had always kept a close eye upon the ancient charm that hung in the old house. It had been still for a long time. The bells were on the inside of the window, untouched by the wind, and somebody had been very careful not to let them stir for many years.

Now they stir. Now they tinkle, laughing gleefully. And the shadows remember the sound. But they had never forgotten it.

Who forgets hunger?

No. Though the people no longer remember their dues, the shadows do.

For almost a hundred years they had waited. They had hid, shadows in the shadows catching only what the could. No one knew the appropriate calls

anymore. No one remembered what was due the darkness.

But someone had rung the bells, somebody had struck the tones that called out the shadows for their sacrifice. They were hungry and came swiftly out of the trees, over the lawn, following the ancient summons. Careful in their excitement, they crept towards the house. They growled in hunger and ground their teeth in anticipation.

Mort lay in an ancient bed under blankets that smelled a little like potpourri and mold. The creaking of the old frame hid the long nails scratching on the steps.

He was miserable and cold. But despite his discomfort, he was tired and soon fell asleep. He slept deeply and without waking.

FOUR

Leaves of Trees

"Don't look 'round," Julie says.

My head turns. Her hand claps to my face to stop the movement.

"That sound," she says, "do you hear it?"

The wind blows the chill into our faces. It hums the melody of the season, the hiss and rasp of leaves, the score of autumn.

"That's the leaves blowing over the ground," I say of the quiet rasping beneath the wind's moan. "It's just the dead leaves being scraped over the dry cement of the sidewalk." I don't know why she is frightened of it.

"Not that, the other."

"What?"

"The sound that's under the leaves."

"Julie–"

"Listen!"

I do. There is only wind. There are only leaves. That is all there is to hear. So I listen to it.

Single leaves scratch over pavement. Piles of hundreds, thousands rustle together. Late comers crinkle softly through the air as they fall. Remnants of a light frost crunch in their folds, as they skim across the ground.

Shwee, shwee, shwee, they whisper with dry, creaky fingers scraping dry, creaky fingers. *Hsch, hsch, hsch,* they caw softly, aged hands sanding the rough cement.

But Julie stands beside me, more still than the trees around us, eyes wet and wide. Those tears were not whipped up by the chill wind.

I put my arm around her. She is frozen even under layers of fleece. I rest a hand on her cold cheek.

"Shh, shh," I whisper, but she sniffles, and tears run over my fingers.

She's never cried before, at least, not that I could see. I didn't think she was one of *those* girls.

I close my eyes, and breathe in.

Scree, scree, scree.

So quiet it is almost lost beneath the groaning zephyr murmuring over the foliage. I hear... It is not like crispy leaves tumbling together, or crispy leaves brushing over the ground, or crispy leaves clinging to branches. It is like... nails being scraped over a blackboard half a mile away.

Or.

Or... *something... else*.

Scree, scree, scree.

My hands drop from around Julie.

"You hear it, don't you?" she asks.

"No." *No. No, no I don't. Only suggestion. Only the suggestion of something else... not something else itself... No.*

Scree, scree, scree.

I don't want to open my eyes to that sound.

"John?"

Her voice is quiet. It shakes.

"John, please."

She knows. She can *see* me hearing it.

"We have to go home," she says.

The hand on my arm, gripping just above the elbow doesn't shake. It squeezes hard, like a frozen clamp. That grip, desperate and insistent, forces my eyes open.

"Don't step on the leaves," she says. Julie never whines, not ever, she doesn't plead or wheedle. But now, a high-pitched terror-strain is creeping into her voice. "Don't run."

"What is it?"

"*They.* They live in the trees. They only come out in the autumn, when the leaves are falling. It's their camouflage."

And I thought she was an indoor girl because she didn't like to get dirty.

Our hands are cold, frozen together like ice.

"We should have worn gloves," she says. "They can smell our skin."

We should put our hands in our pockets, and we both know it. But fear has cemented them together.

The house is ahead of us. My strides lengthen.

"Please," she whimpers, "don't run."

I look over at her.

"Don't move," I say.

Our feet freeze to the sidewalk. I extend one hand slowly, very slowly, to her back.

"It's just a leaf," I say, "just a leaf."

She nods, and the tiny movement seems like it will shatter her icy form. The leaf shifts.

The veins of the brown, dead thing sticking to her fleece are too prominent, like those on an old woman's hands. The maple points are too long, like nails.

I blink and a desiccated hand moves another millimeter up Julie's back.

But it is too thin, too brittle. I blink, and it is a leaf again. I start to draw back my hand.

Julie laughs. It is a choke of a giggle that she can't stop; she clamps her hand to her mouth and stifles the noise. Tears are still running, and she is a melting and trembling ice statue now.

The thing on her back moves up another millimeter.

"It's just a leaf," I say.

"The fingers of trees."

I blink.

The leaf is a hand as thin as paper.

Paper... cuts.

I bat out one hand, and the thing flies off of her. We grab hands again. One, two, three steps to the house. Then the door slams behind us.

We stay inside now, during autumn, drinking coffee by a fire like an old couple. We close the curtains and lock the doors while we wait for the winter to destroy the camouflage.

FIVE

THE BEAR WOULD STARVE

The unwashed underwear won't leave him along. The unwashed underwear and the dirt under his nails and the tangles in his hair and the blisters on his feet. The tiny discomforts chafe his sensibilities. Even now.

Ten feet away the grizzly sits up.

Whoooeeeee... whooooeeee.

The bear stares. Its mouth is frozen open, motionless. But the whine continues, falling over the dangling tongue.

If only there had been a place to wash up! But there hasn't been a sink or a pump or even a stream for miles. There hasn't been much of anything. Only fields.

The bear stares.

Whoooeeeee... whooooeeee.

Spit drips off its tongue. The unnatural keening continues.

One nail picks at the dirt under another.

They're too long.

There hasn't been a pair of nail clippers in miles either.

While one hand distracts itself with dirty nails, the other holds a gun. His fingers clutch at it like a child hiding under the bed clutching a comfort blanket. A cold metal comfort blanket. His hand hangs, the weapon pointing at the ground, useless, empty.

But it doesn't matter.

If it were loaded, he would be killed by a dead bear.

The blank eyes don't recognize the sound forcing its way out of their own mouth. More spit drips, unsatisfied.

The bear won't eat him.

"You too, huh?"

"Eat, Sean."

"No."

"Just a few bites, come on, be a good boy."

"No."

"Sean--"

"--Mommy--"

A man stands at a counter. He reads a newspaper, oblivious to the woman tapping ten manicured nails against a polished table pleading with a little blond boy.

"Sean--"

"I don't need to."

"Of course you do."

"No."

"Come on, eat your dinner."

"I don't have to."

"You do if you want dessert."

"I don't."

"Well if you want to see the outside of your room before next week you will. Eat your dinner or your grounded."

"I don't have to."

"Yes, you do."

"But I don't need to."

"Come on."

"I don't have to."

"Yes you do! I just told you, now do what mommy says okay?"

"No, you're wrong. I don't need to. I don't need to because--"

"No, don't, honey--"

"--because he says so."

"Please... don't say that."

"It's true. He told me."

"I'm sure he did, but you still have to--"

"I don't have to eat dinner. He says so."

"Don't you want to?"

"I... I don't know."

"Look, okay don't eat the vegetables. Okay? Eat--just eat the macaroni. How about that?"

"I don't know... maybe, okay."

"Good, good."

"No, I don't think so."

"Please?"

"No."

"Just one more bite?"

"He says I don't--"

"Okay, okay. Just, go... go to your room, honey."

"Okay."

The child disappears. One red fingernail scratches at a lone forehead wrinkle. Then it rests on the table. The fingers don't tap now. They tremble.

"What's wrong with our boy?"

The man at the counter doesn't look up from the newspaper to answer the shaking voice of his wife. "He's a picky eater."

"But he's hearing things."

"No. He's imagining things. All kids do at that age."

"I don't know if it's that simple."

The man's eyes snap up from the paper.

"Why do you always do that?"

"Wha--"

"Why do you try to make things more than what they are? Do you want it to be something else? Do you want there to be something wrong with him?"

"No, but--"

"Do you want a child that's different?"

"No."

"He has an imaginary friend. All kids do. Most of them aren't dietitians, but at least he's not jumping off the roof in a cape and a mask."

"But I don't think it's the same."

"Don't worry. He'll grow out of it."

"But what if he doesn't?"

"He will."

"But--"

"I told you not to worry, didn't I?"

"Yes... yes."

The bear whistles.

Whoooeeeee... whoooeeee.

The unnatural, impossible, open mouthed whine rushes over the flat fields. The gun hits the ground.

There's dirt under Sean's nails. His underwear's dirty. He's pretty sure he'd smell it if it weren't for the pesticide from the crops. There's an itch down there too. Could be his imagination trying to distract him, but it's bothersome. Everything seems bothersome now.

Everything except the gaping predator dead ahead and the thing howling inside it.

The bear stares.

Then it grunts. Then grunts again, an animal sound. A sound from the bear itself, not the thing wearing it. Confusion. Frustration. It shakes itself, spiky fur shivering, blubber rolling--an animal twitch. It's tongue drips, mouth still open. It grunts.

"I know, teddy. I know"

The bear stares.

"He's lost so much weight."

"Thirty five pounds. Dangerous for a child his size."

"But my husband doesn't want... he doesn't want to--"

"The weight's not the biggest problem."

"I know.

"How long has he been hearing voices?"

"Voice. Just one, I think. Since he was very little--eight, I think... at least that's when we noticed."

"Two years?"

"Yes."

"And you can't get him to eat?"

"Not often enough. And only little bits when he does. I try to get him to eat. But I can't--I can't... I've tried, I've really, really--"

"It's not your fault. It is difficult to reason with the mentally ill."

"Is he... is-is he ill?"

"Maybe."

"My husband thinks it's just imagination."

"It's not."

"He doesn't think, or want to think there's anything wrong."

"What do you think?"

"I don't know. I don't know about these things. That's why I came here. I don't think it's just imagination though..."

"It isn't."

"But how do you know? He's still young."

"He's ten. Besides I've seen children with imaginary friends, and I've seen kids with voices in their heads. The ones with imaginary friends don't starve themselves."

"So you've seen this before?"

"Well, no, not this particular symptom, but mental illnesses often manifest in self-harm."

"Can you help?"

"Yes. There are medications to suppress the delusions."

"Is there any way you could... leave this off the record?"

"I have to record all treatment."

"But he's just a child. Can't we just... just keep it between you and me?"

"I am a fully licensed doctor, Ma'am, not a back ally quack. I cannot alter his records. Especially if I am to prescribe medication--"

"Please! This will affect his whole life, won't it?"

"Schizophrenia can be managed."

"But background checks for jobs and things--people could find out. He'll lose opportunities, or-or people will be biased. He wants to work in security, you know."

"I can't--"

"But you're a doctor! Can't you just get him the medication somehow? Leave it off the record? Couldn't you do that if you wanted to?"

"Yes, but I will not--"

"Please. I can pay you more. I have my own account. My husband won't know about it. I can pay you whatever you ask."

"I can't--"

"Please? Name your price."

"He would have to get his medicine from me. He would have to check in regularly..."

"He can, he can. Will... will you?"

"What can you pay?"

The bear yawns, snout wrinkling, eyes scrunching up. The massive head shakes. It groans, then it growls. Then the growl rises to a screeching pitch and repeats the sound that can't come from a bear.

Whoooeeeee... whoooeeeee...

Another grunt cuts it off. One giant paw bats the open muzzle, as if to bat away the alien sound coming from it's own mouth. A nail slashes its face. Blood drips over the spikes of fur.

The bear howls.

"Sorry, teddy. I don't think you can get it out like that."

It groans. The great head dips for a second. The paw swats it again. The blood smears. Another howl turns into a whimper. It's hard not to feel sad for the crying grizzly.

Whoooeeeee... whoooeeeee...

And the eyes are blank again, the paws still.

"Come on. Come on."

"Black belt?"

"Yes, sir."

"For how long?"

"Since I was sixteen. Took karate since I was a child. My mother didn't want me to get bullied."

"Why would you be bullied?"

"No particular reason. Quiet, smart, allergies. And I was little. Kids are cruel."

"Of course."

"Sir?"

"Yes?"

"What exactly do you need me to do?"

"Protect my daughter."

"From what?"

"Oh nothing in particular. Herself mostly. She's out to college now and a bit wild. I just worry, you know, as a father does."

"I see."

"Her mother bought her a very sheltered life you know--not like yours I guess. Doesn't really know how to handle herself. Doesn't know her limits."

"I understand."

"She's out at all hours of the night, and I don't doubt doing things she shouldn't be."

"College is like that."

"She's a pretty girl, too. Attracts attention, you know what I mean? And

she wants it, too."

"She's young."

"Yes, yes. And I want to look over her shoulder, keep her out of trouble."

"Of course."

"But she's an adult now, just turned eighteen. She's got to break out on her own. Learn to live and make mistakes and all that."

"Right."

"I don't want to smother her, you know. That'll just make it worse. But I need someone who can keep an eye on her."

"I can do that sir."

"You're young, you'll blend in with her crowd. Just watch out for her."

"I will."

"You've been doing this a while you said, right? Private security?"

"Five years."

"Good, good."

"Daddy?"

"She's here--hey, sweetie. What are you doing home?"

"I'm going out. Just stopped by for an outfit."

"Okay, but I want you to take your new security."

"Daddy, I don't need--"

"I'm not stopping you am I? No--don't protest. You want to have fun, fine, but you'll take some protection."

"Just give me some mace or something."

"This is better. This is Sean, he's just going to make sure you're okay. Sean, this is my daughter Emma."

She smiles.

"Okay."

He nods.

"Hey."

"Bring her back safe."

"I will."

"Bye, Daddy."

The little red convertible drives too fast, but somehow he knows pointing that out won't slow it down.

"So where are you going?"

"It's just on the other side of town."

She hums over the sound of the wind and the car. Ten minutes later they screech to a halt on a side street a few inches behind a parked van.

"We're here!"

Weeds grow in the burnt out shell of a house. Across the street shreds of yellow police tape flutter on a peeling porch. She skips ahead.

"This is a terrible neighborhood."

"Don't worry. You're here to protect me, anyway, right?"

"Yes."

She sticks out her hand, a couple white tablets in the palm.

"Want one?"

"No."

She smiles and sticks out her tongue as the tablet dissolves. Out of the car, Sean watches the shadows closely.

"Why do you do this?"

She laughs. "Do what?"

"Dangerous shit."

"You sound like my father. But he doesn't say 'shit.'"

"I'm serious. You trying to get yourself killed?"

"Maybe."

She smiles, teasing him. She spins around on the sidewalk. One finger twirls in her hair.

"Seriously. Why do you do it?"

"You know."

"Not really. I didn't go to college, and I don't get the whole party-till-you-drop thing."

"Not that, but you get it, though."

"No I don't."

"He told me you do."

"Who? Your father? Told you what?"

"No, dummy. He told me."

"What?"

"He told me."

"You're so high. Why do you do this?" He's talking to himself now. The girl on E is not going to tell him anything.

"Because he tells me to."

"Who?"

"You know who. He told me."

He looks into the vapid eyes, wiped blank by something other than drugs.

He tells me to.

"No."

"He tells me to."

"No--"

"Yup."

"Stop, Emma--don't listen."

He's stopped dead in the street now. The girl spins ahead of him. He catches her shoulders.

"He tells me, he tells me, he tells me to!"

"No, no, no, no."

She laughs.

Some of the shadows move.

"We should go back."

"No."

"It's late and this is not a good place to be."

"Don't worry about that."

"It's my job to worry about that."

She laughs. "You don't need to."

"Emma--"

"Besides, they're not the dangerous ones."

The shadows come closer. There are four of them, black hoodies pulled up, looking like trouble.

"Hey there!"

"Emma, stop."

"Whaddaya doing in these parts?" One of the shadows talks.

Emma giggles. "We're just walking to a party. What are you doing?"

He's between her and the shadows now. "Back off."

The shadow talks again. "Hey, we're just getting friendly. Welcome to the neighborhood."

"We're not staying. Come on Emma."

"No, you come on! We don't want to leave our friends so soon, do we?" She giggles.

"Hey she doesn't want to go," says the shadow. "Stay with us baby."

She giggles.

The bodyguard grabs her arm. "Come on, Emma."

"I don't think so." The shadow moves closer. "This is our street. She wants to stay, she's welcome to it. You're the one who needs to back the fuck off."

"I want to stay. I want to stay. And so does he... so does he! Come on let's stay, Sean. Seany! You, me and him, let's stay."

"That's right babe. You got to the party already."

Another shadow moves in.

She giggles.

"Get the fuck away from her."

There's a gun in the shadow's hand. The bodyguard moves.

Bang!

The shot goes over their head. The hand holding the gun is twisted, broken, bent in the wrong direction. It drops the weapon. The bodyguard's hand snatches it up before it hits the ground. One of the shadows runs. The injured one follows. Emma giggles. But the third shadow, slow to follow, has another gun in his hands.

Bang!

A bullet hits the shadow's leg. He falls, but the arm with the weapon lifts from the ground. But the bodyguard's arm is raised too.

Click--click.

Damn.

Sean swipes at the shadow on the ground, once, twice, then it lies still.

Sirens wail. A patrol in the area must have heard the shots. The shadow on the ground rolls over, groans. The fourth hesitates, then runs.

They'll get him. He grabs Emma's arm. "Come on."

She smiles and pulls back. Twirls her hair. "Told you, they're not the dangerous ones." She laughs.

Stop it. "Let's get out of here."

"Told you it's not dangerous."

"Are you blind?"

"They're not the danger." Twirl. Giggle.

The cop car pulls around the corner.

"Shit. Now we have to talk to the--"

Thunk.

"Emma--Emma!"

She's on the sidewalk, eyes open, not moving. Then her eyes lock on his and she smiles.

Not her.

Her lips quiver and she croons something and giggles and croons. "Nice ride. Nice ride."

"Stop. Stop!"

"Nice ride... nice ride..."

"Get out!"

"Nice ride."

"Get out of her!"

Then the lips still.

"No--shit!"

No pulse...

Chest compressions.

Now breathe in the mouth. No. No. Not with that thing... I can't. I can't.

"What's going on here?"

It killed her. "Officer, she collapsed. She's on something."

"Yeah, I can see that."

He's looking at a little bag of tablets laying beside the dead hand. He reaches down and feels her wrist, shakes his head.

"She's dead."

"I know."

"Who are you?"

"Bodyguard."

It was in her... how many are there?

The guy's partner kneeling over by the guy with the bullet in his leg looks up.

"What is it?" he calls over.

"No signs of struggle. Looks like she OD-ed."

"Too bad. Hey you, you shoot this guy?"

"Yeah, he pulled a gun. See it, there, next to him? There were four of them."

"Okay. Ambulance is headed here. Then we'll need you to come down to the station with us, answer some questions."

"Right." *Like hell.*

His hand reaches into his right pocket, a reflex when he's nervous. It pulls out an orange bottle. He opens it.

One pill falls out.

No!

He backs away from the ambulance. They're leaning over the body on a stretcher now. Out of the flashing circle of red and blue lights, he turns and runs. Dark streets pass until there are only trees.

How many? How many are there? How many!

The big dipper shines over head. Polaris winks.

"Okay," as if answering the stars. "Okay."

The doctor's office is tucked away in a town to the north a distant innocuous place where rich people go to hide their problems. A few hour drive but a few days on foot.

He can last a few days. Especially in the wild.

No people. Avoid the people. That's where they live. Can't go anywhere there's people.

It's only woods and fields between here and there, and he is strong.

It's the underwear that bothers him. Sleeping under the stars over the hard ground is okay. Solitude is okay--it's good. No people means none of... them. But the dirt under his fingernails and his own smell that he knows is there under the rot of the forest and the pesticides of the fields bothers him.

Life was always so clean, so careful. He threw himself into karate because it was the only time he wasn't treated like he was made of glass. That's what his mother thought of him: little possessed child, needs to be coddled. It didn't matter. It was the pills that held off the... thing. The coddling did nothing. Nothing but make her feel better.

He'd stopped at a Mc Donald's with only one car in the lot. The manager hadn't notice him coming in to wash his underwear--and his socks, and his face and hands.

That was two days ago.

Almost there. Almost there.

There are more fields in between the trees now. Soon there will be houses, then streetlights, then shops. Then the doctor's office.

A bear stands in the way.

It sits back on its heels, watching him, mouth open.

The gun is in his hand, but he knows it's empty.

B*ack away, slow... talk low... don't look it in the eye... hands in the air to*

look big.

Whoooooeeeee... whooooeeeee

His hands drop.

Whoooooeeeee... whooooeeeee

The sound of a bear trying to talk.

"No. No..."

Whoooeeeee....

"Animals too, then?"

"Yes."

It isn't the bear that speaks. It isn't the thing in the bear that speaks. It is the thing in his own head.

"No!"

He grabs reflexively for the empty bottle in his pocket.

"No..."

"You haven't been listening, Sean."

The bottle cracks in his fist.

"Stop--"

"Let me out. Let me out."

"I want to!"

"I need you to let me out."

"Go... go... go!"

"I can't leave until you die."

"Get out! Get out!"

"I can't."

"Stop!"

"I'm trying. I've been trying."

"Ahhh... stop... oh god..."

"You stopped listening to me."

"I didn't--I didn't mean to..."

"It's okay--"

"No!"

"It's okay. My friends can help."

Ngruuhhh Ngruuhh. The bear groans.

"No--"

It charges.

"Aaahhh!"

Blood runs down his face. Fear mirrors in the eyes of the bear, stupid eyes without understanding. His own fear ebbs almost as if it were being absorbed by the bear. It gives way to pity at the look in those stupid eyes.

The bear will starve. Or fall off a cliff. Or get mauled by one of it's own.

Then another parasite will be free.

Another gash opens in his abdomen. The fearful eyes, and the grizzled fur, and the hanging tongue, and most of the pain disappear.

"Thanks for the ride."

Then the voice is gone.

SIX

Space

~

Author's Note:

This collection of stories concludes with... nothing. This story originated from a very bad day with a *Writer's Digest* prompt: "While cleaning a room in your house you find a door you didn't know was there." On a better day, the answer no doubt would have been something mysterious and fascinating. But on this particular day, the only answer that appeared to *What do you find in a secret room?* was *Nothing.*

~

The mess that Ann left behind wasn't the neat metaphorical kind that you don't have to sweep and box up. It was the physical, piles-of-junk, grime-in-the-corners type. We could have had hoards of treasure piled in the attic, and I would never know.

Instead of treasure in the dustiest corner of the attic, I found a door. And while I did not know the secrets of every pile of junk in the house, I knew one thing for certain: there was one door in the attic, and it was the one at the top of the stairs. This one was on the opposite wall.

One more room to clean, I thought.

I opened the door, and there stood an old man, snowy and scored as a birch, and as tall and straight as one too. He stood with arms crossed solemnly, like the gatekeeper of the invisible room behind him.

"Can I help you?" I said.

"No."

"Can you just stand aside then so I can clean?" I waved my broom as proof of this intent. "Thought I was finished, but it looks like there's one room left."

"No."

"Why's that?"

"There is nothing there"

"Well then, it should be quick." I peered around the gatekeeper's shoulder, but it was dark.

"You will see nothing."

"Look, can I just go in the room?"

"No."

"What if I just do this," and I took a mocking step to one side, and another, edging around him. "What will you do then?"

"Nothing."

"See you later, then."

And I danced about the gatekeeper, until I was at his back.

I stood there for a moment, looking around, and realized, I was the only thing in the room.

The only anything in the room.

Then what is pulling at my skin?

Something was tugging at it all over.

Then... *vacuum*, my mind supplied. Plain air, without wind, without cold, without heat, just air cannot be felt. But its absence is unmistakable.

Every muscle strained to move, every alveolus reached for air, every blood cell cowered from the snatching void, I felt it all because there was nothing else to feel.

My jaw opened wide, trying to unhinge like a snake's, throat pumping to suck in air. There was nothing to inhale. The muscles in my chest wrenched to expand, but nothing filled the cavity.

My body was falling out–and up and down and around–with no air to keep me in.

My eyeballs expanded, the lids widening. Was it was shock or the void tugging on them? They would not shut.

Muscles, work, damn you!

They refused. I could not stop myself from seeing.

It was not blackness.

It was not dark.

It was empty.

Nothing.

I felt my own mind. It had one thought.

...dying?

Then,

No... no time...no time for death.

An arm reached around my neck from behind.

For an old man, he was strong. Or maybe there was no resistance in the void.

The exposed threads of the carpet scraped my hands; the floorboards beneath bruised them. Then, the threads were pressed against my face, scratching my cheek. Finally, I closed my eyes.

Darkness. Blessed darkness.

"You should not see nothing."

I opened my eyes. The dim glow of the attic blazed in an unbearable light beside the void, which still lurked on the periphery. I kept it in the periphery. As I turned my head, I did not let it enter into focus.

"Why is it there?"

"Do you think we live in a universe of things where spaces exist

between? No. Worlds are built in spaces--they came first. Nothing came first. It is the pervading force. These are mere islands we stand on. They float in oceans of void."

"And you keep it back?"

"You can't keep nothing back. I keep you back."

"But–"

"Build walls. Build houses. Build things between you and the spaces all around. Don't see them; it's built into you not to."

"Then how did I..."

"It permeates."

The door clicked shut.

The floor was warm after the void, and I lay on it, trying not to have seen the void.

There is a wardrobe in that corner now. It collects dust. Spiders nest behind it. Mice use it as a toilet. I do not clean there anymore. I do not see.

But I know, and knowing is enough.

I swam in the ocean, and brought water out with me.

The spaces pervade.

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~A